Motion Picture Production and Distribution

(SIC 781, 782)

SIGNIFICANT POINTS

- Employment is projected to grow rapidly, with keen competition expected for the more glamorous jobs—actors, directors, and producers.
- Although many films are shot on location throughout the United States and abroad, employment is centered in several major cities, particularly New York and Los Angeles.
- Many workers have formal training, but experience, professionalism, talent, and creativity are the most important factors for getting many jobs in this industry.

Nature of the Industry

In its early years, the motion picture industry was synonymous with Hollywood, whose few major studios produced only newsreels and feature films. Over the years, these studios have been joined by several medium-size companies and many small, independent companies that have adapted to changes in the industry created by the advent of television, cable television, videocassette recorders, and the Internet. Today, many films are produced for television and the home video market, including music videos and movies made for television.

Making a movie can be a difficult, yet rewarding experience. However, it is also a very risky one. Although thousands of movies are produced each year, only a small number of these account for most box office receipts. Most films do not make a full return on their investment from domestic box office revenues, so filmmakers rely on profits from other markets, such as broadcast and cable television, videocassette sales and rentals, and foreign distribution. In fact, major film companies are receiving a growing portion of their revenue from abroad. These cost pressures have reduced the number of film production companies—as of mid 1998, seven major studios produced most of the television and movie productions released nationally. Smaller and independent filmmakers are finding it difficult to finance new productions, as large motion picture production companies prefer to support established filmmakers.

In addition to feature films, workers in this industry produce a variety of other types of films. Documentary films—chronicling actual events with real people and using film clips and interviews—have become very popular in recent years. Documentaries offer excellent job and training opportunities for beginners because they do not require the employment of actors and can be made with a small crew and little equipment, which often can be rented. Also, educational films, which vary from "do-it-yourself" projects to exercise films, are growing in popularity. Many film production jobs are also found in advertising agencies that make commercials. Production of these films offers an excellent learning experience for beginning filmmakers.

In addition, many business, industrial, and government films promote an organization's image, provide information on its activities or products, or aid in fund raising or worker training. Some of these films are short enough that they can be released to the public through the Internet. Although many of these films are made by professional film companies, many are also made by in-house audiovisual departments and film staffs of business, industry, or government organizations.

Working Conditions

Most individuals in this industry work in clean, comfortable surroundings. Shooting outside the studio or "on location," however, may require working in adverse weather conditions. Regardless of whether actors and actresses, directors, producers, cinematographers, and camera operators work in the studio or on location, they need stamina to withstand the heat of studio and stage lights, unpleasant and sometimes dangerous conditions on location, long and irregular hours, and travel.

Directors and producers often work under stress as they try to meet schedules, stay within budget, and resolve personnel and production problems. Actors and actresses, directors, producers, cinematographers, and camera operators face the anxiety of rejection and intermittent employment. Writers and editors must deal with criticism and demands to restructure and rewrite their work many times until the producer and director are finally satisfied. All writers must be able to withstand such criticism and disappointment; freelance writers are under the added pressure of always looking for new jobs. In spite of these difficulties, many people find that the glamour and excitement of filmmaking more than compensate for the frequently demanding and uncertain nature of careers in motion pictures.

Unions are very important in this industry. Virtually all film production companies and television networks sign contracts with union locals, mandating the hiring of union workers. When this occurs, nonunion workers can be hired for a short time, after which they must either join the union or be replaced with union workers. Actors who appear in filmed entertainment—including television, commercials, and movies—belong to the Screen Actors Guild, Inc.; those in television generally belong to the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. Film and television directors belong to the Directors Guild of America. Art directors, cartoonists, editors, costumers, scenic artists, set designers, camera operators, sound technicians, projectionists, and shipping, booking, and other distribution employees belong to the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Motion Picture Machine Operators (I.A.T.S.E.), or the United Scenic Artists Association. Opera and stage performers (including Broadway productions), belong to the Actors Equity Association.

Employment

In 1998, there were about 270,000 wage and salary jobs in the motion picture production and distribution industry. Most of the workers were in motion picture production and services. They involved casting, acting, directing, editing, film processing, motion picture and videotape reproduction, and equipment and wardrobe rental. Although seven major studios produce most of the motion pictures released in the United States, many small companies are used as contractors throughout the process. Most motion picture and distribution establishments employ fewer than 10 workers (chart).

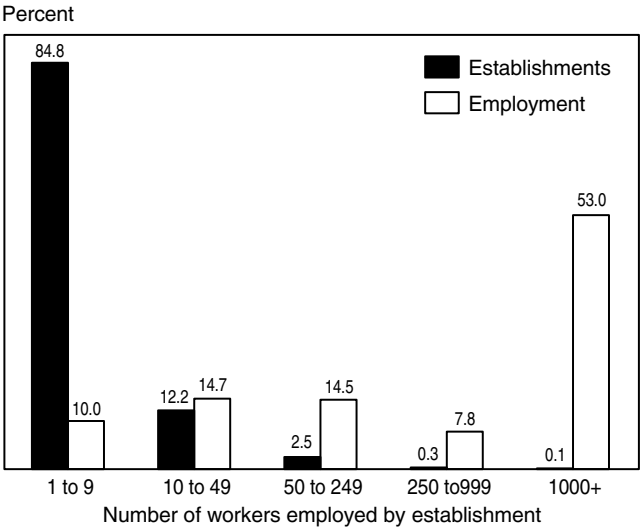
Many additional individuals work in the motion picture production and distribution industry on a freelance, contract, or part-time basis, but accurate statistics on their numbers are not available. Many people in the film industry are self-employed, independent contractors. They sell their services to anyone who needs them, often working on productions for many different companies during the year. Competition for these jobs is intense, and many people are unable to earn a living solely from freelance work.

Employment in the production of motion pictures and other films for television is centered in Los Angeles and New York City. Studios are also located in Florida, Texas, and other parts of the country. In addition, many films are shot on location throughout the United States and abroad. In television, most opportunities are at the headquarters of the major networks in New York City, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and, to a lesser extent, Chicago.

Occupations in the Industry

The length of the credits at the end of most feature films gives an idea of the variety of workers involved in producing and distributing films. The motion picture industry employs workers in every major occupational group. Nevertheless, about 2 out of 5 salaried workers held professional and technical jobs and about 14 percent worked in administrative support (table 1).

Most motion picture production and distribution establishments employ fewer than 10 workers



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, *County Business Patterns*, 1997

Jobs in the industry can be broadly classified according to the three phases of filmmaking: Preproduction, production, and postproduction. Preproduction is the planning phase. This includes budgeting, casting, finding the right location, set and costume design, set construction, and scheduling. Production is the actual making of the film. The number of people involved in the production phase can vary from a few for a documentary film to hundreds for a feature film. It is during this phase that the actual filming is done. Postproduction activities take place in the editing rooms and recording studios in which the film is shaped into its final form.

Some individuals work in all three phases. *Producers*, for example, are involved in every phase from beginning to end. These workers look for ideas that they believe can be turned into lucrative film projects or television shows. They may see many films, read hundreds of manuscripts, and maintain numerous contacts with literary agents and publishers. Producers are also responsible for all financial aspects of a film, including finding financing for its production. The producer works closely with the director on the selection of script, principal members of the cast, and filming locations, because these decisions greatly affect the cost of a film. Once financing is obtained, the producer works out a detailed budget and sees to it that the production costs stay within that budget. In a large production, the producer also works closely with *production managers* who are in charge of crews, travel, casting, and equipment. For television shows, much of this process requires especially tight deadlines.

Directors translate the script to film and are involved in every stage of production. They may supervise hundreds of people, from scriptwriters to costume and set designers. Directors are in charge of all technical and artistic aspects of the film or television show. They conduct auditions and rehearsals and approve the location, scenery, costumes, choreography, and music. In short, they direct the entire cast and crew during shooting. *Assistant directors* help them with such details as handling extras, transportation of equipment, and arrangements for food and accommodations. Some directors assume multiple roles, such as *director-producer* or *writer-producer-director*. Successful directors must know how to hire the right people and create effective teams.

Preproduction occupations. Before a film or a television program moves into the production phase, it begins with an idea which *scriptwriters* turn into a script. They either develop an original idea or take an existing literary work and adapt it into a screenplay or television pilot (a sample episode of a proposed television series). Scriptwriters work closely with producers and directors. Sometimes they prepare a shooting script that has instructions on shots, camera angles, and lighting. They frequently make changes to reflect the directors' and producers' ideas and desires. The work, therefore, requires not only creativity, but also an ability to write and rewrite many script versions under pressure. Although the work of feature film screenwriters usually ends when the shooting begins, writing for television usually is a continuous process.

Feature film writers usually have many years of experience and work on a free-lance basis. Many start as copywriters in advertising agencies and as writers for educational film companies, government audiovisual departments, or in-house corporate film divisions. These jobs not only serve as

a good training ground for beginners but also have greater job security than freelancing.

Art directors design the physical environment of the film or television set to create the mood called for by the script. Television art directors may design elaborate sets for use in situation comedies or commercials. They supervise many different people, including *illustrators*, *scenic designers*, *model makers*, *carpenters*, *painters*, *electricians*, *laborers*, *set decorators*, *costume designers,* and *makeup* and *hairstyling artists*. These positions can provide an entry into the motion picture industry. Many start in these jobs in live theater productions and then move back and forth between the stage, film, and television.

Production occupations. *Actors* and *actresses* entertain and communicate with the audience through their interpretation of dramatic roles. Only a small number achieve recognition in motion pictures or television. Many are cast in supporting roles or as walk-ons. Some start as background performers with no lines to deliver. Also called "extras," these are the people in the background—crowds on the street, working in offices, or dancing at a ball. Others perform stunts, such as driving cars in chase scenes or falling from high places. Although a few actors and actresses find parts in feature films straight out of drama school, most support themselves by working for many years outside of the industry. Most acting jobs are found through an agent. Beginners and lesser known actors and actresses usually register with several agents, who find auditions that may lead to acting assignments.

As the industry changes and becomes more technological, so does the role of the actor. New issues for actors include the use of digital effects using electronic computer-made images and old file footage to create a scene that never really existed. For example, movies now are able to combine various special effect techniques to bring back long-extinct dinosaurs and recreate historical scenes. Computer technology has opened up new opportunities for actors to work in interactive media. Software has advanced to the point that live action film and video can be incorporated into both computer programs and CD-ROM.

Cinematographers, camera operators, and gaffers work together to capture the scenes in the script on film. *Cinematographers* compose the film shots to reflect the mood the director wishes to create. They do not usually operate the camera; instead, they plan and coordinate the actual filming. *Camera operators* handle all camera movements and perform the actual shooting. *Assistant camera operators* check the equipment, load the camera, operate the slate and clapsticks (now electronic), and take care of the equipment. *Commercial camera operators* specialize in shooting commercials. This experience translates easily into documentary work.

Gaffers, or lighting technicians, set up different kinds of lighting needed for filming. They work for the *director of photography*, who plans all lighting needs. Many individuals get started in these occupations by just helping out on sets; they run errands, move things, and help with props.

Sound engineers, recordists, and *boom operators* record dialogue, sounds, music, and special effects during the filming. Sound engineers are the "ears" of the film. They supervise all sound generated during filming. They select microphones and the level of sound from mixers and synthesizers to assure the best sound quality. Recordists help to set up the equipment and are in charge of the individual tape recorders. Boom operators handle long booms with microphones that are moved from one area of the set to another. Because more filming is done on location and the equipment has become compact, lighter, and simpler to operate, one person often performs many of the above functions.

Special effects technicians create the movie "magic." Through their imagination, creativity, and skill, they can create anything required by the script, from talking animals to flaming office buildings and earthquakes. Many begin as stage technicians or scenic designers. They not only need a good imagination, but also must be part carpenter, plumber, electrician, and electronics expert. These workers must be familiar with many ways of achieving a desired special effect because each job requires different skills. Computer skills have become very important in this field. Some areas of television and film production, including animation and visual effects, now rely heavily on computer technology. Although there was a time when elaborate computer animation was restricted to blockbuster movies, much of the 3-dimensional work being generated today is happening in small-to mid-sized companies. Some specialists create "synthespians"—realistic digital humans—which appear mainly in science fiction productions. These digital images are often used when a stunt or scene is too dangerous for an actor.

Postproduction occupations. One of the most important tasks in filmmaking and television production is editing. After the film is shot and processed, *editors* study footage, select the best shots, and assemble them in the most effective way. Their goal is to create dramatic continuity and the right pace for the desired mood. Editors first organize the footage and then structure the sequence of the film by splicing and resplicing the best shots. They must have a good eye and understand the subject of the film and the director's intentions. The ability to work with digital media is also becoming increasingly important. Strong computer skills are mandatory for most jobs. However, few industry-wide standards exist, so companies often look for people with skills in the hardware/software they are currently using.

Assistant editors or *dubbing editors* select the sound track and special sound effects to produce the final combination of sight and sound as it appears on the screen. *Editing room assistants* help with the splicing, patching, rewinding, coding, and storing of the film. Some television networks have *film librarians*, who are responsible for organizing, filing, cataloging, and selecting footage for the film editors. There is no one way of entering the occupation of editor; however, experience as a film librarian, sound editor, or assistant editor—plus talent and perseverance—usually help.

Sound effects editors or *audio recording engineers* perform one of the final jobs in postproduction. They add prerecorded and live sound effects and background music by manipulating various elements of music, dialogue, and background sound to fit the picture. Their work is increasingly computer-driven as electronic equipment replaces conventional tape recording devices. The best way to gain experience in sound editing is through work in radio stations, with music groups, in music videos, or adding audio to Internet sites.

After the film or television show is finished, *marketing personnel* develop the marketing strategy for films. They estimate the demand for the film and the audience to whom it

will appeal, develop an advertising plan, and decide where and when to release the film. *Advertising workers* or "unit publicists" write press releases and short biographies of actors, actresses, and directors for newspapers and magazines. They may also set up interviews or television appearances for the stars or director to promote a film. *Sales workers* sell the finished product. Many production companies have their own staff which distributes, leases, and sells their films and made-for-television programs to theater owners and television networks. The best way to enter sales is to start by selling advertising time for television stations.

Table 1. Employment of wage and salary workers in motion picture production and distribution by occupation, 1998 and projected change, 1998-2008

(Employment in thousands)

Occupation	1998 Employment Number	1998 Employment Percent	1998-2008 Percent change
All occupations	270	100.0	16.9
Professional specialty	95	35.2	24.3
Actors, directors and producers	64	23.5	25.6
Artists and commercial artists	7	2.5	26.7
Photographers and camera operators	3	1.1	17.7
Operators, fabricators, and laborers	68	25.3	15.5
Helpers, laborers, and material movers, hand	50	18.5	17.1
Machine setters, setup operators, operators and tenders	8	2.9	3.2
Industrial truck and tractor operators	7	2.6	17.7
Hand workers, including assemblers and fabricators	3	1.0	17.7
Administrative support, including clerical	37	13.7	6.5
Shipping, receiving, and traffic clerks	5	1.7	8.1
Secretaries	5	1.7	-6.4
Production, planning, and expediting clerks	4	1.4	5.2
Office and administrative support supervisors and managers	4	1.4	14.4
General office clerks	3	1.3	18.8
Stock clerks and order fillers	3	1.3	17.7
Financial records processing occupations	3	1.2	-2.4
Executive, managerial, and administrative	27	9.8	13.5
General managers and top executives	9	3.3	14.1
Management support occupations	7	2.5	16.2
Precision production, craft, and repair	20	7.5	13.1
Production occupations, precision	4	1.6	3.5
Mechanics, installers, and repairers	3	1.1	8.3
Marketing and sales	12	4.4	17.4
Technicians and related support	7	2.5	13.2
Broadcast technicians	4	1.4	17.7
Service	4	1.5	6.8

Large film and television studios are headed by a *chief executive officer* (CEO) who is responsible to a board of directors and stockholders. Various managers such as *financial managers* or *business managers*, as well as *accountants* and *lawyers* report to the CEO. Small film companies, and those in business and educational film production, cannot afford to have so many different people managing only one aspect of the business. As a result, they are usually headed by an *owner-producer*, who originates, develops, produces, and distributes films with just a small staff and some freelance workers. These companies offer good training opportunities to beginners because they provide exposure to many phases of film and television production.

Training and Advancement

Formal training can be a great asset to workers in filmmaking and television production, but experience, talent, and creativity are usually the most important factors in getting a job. In almost all areas of film and television production, entry-level workers start at the bottom. Many start out by working on a documentary, business, educational, industrial, or government film, or in the music video industry. This kind of experience can lead to more advanced jobs.

Actors and actresses are usually required to have formal dramatic training or acting experience. Training can be obtained in dramatic arts schools throughout the country, although most schools are located in New York City and Los Angeles. Over 500 colleges and universities offer bachelor's or higher degrees in dramatic and theater arts. Training in singing and dance, experience in modeling, and performing in local and regional theater are especially useful. Many actors begin their career by performing in commercials and as extras. Most professional actors rely on agents or managers to find auditions for them.

There are no specific training requirements for producers and directors. Talent, experience, and business acumen are very important. An ability to deal under stress with many different kinds of people is also essential. Directors and producers come from varied backgrounds. Many start as assistant directors and producers, but actors, writers, film editors, and business managers often enter these jobs. Formal training in directing and producing is available at some colleges and universities. Individuals interested in production management who have a bachelor's degree or 2 years of on-set experience in motion picture or television production may qualify for the Assistant Directors Training Program offered jointly by the Directors Guild of America and motion picture and television companies. Training is given in New York City and Los Angeles. To enroll in this highly competitive program, individuals must take a written exam and go through a series of assessments.

Although many scriptwriters have college degrees, talent and creativity are even more important determinants of success in the industry. Scriptwriters need to develop creative writing skills, a mastery of film language, and a basic understanding of filmmaking. Self-motivation, perseverance, and an ability to take criticism are also valuable.

Editors not only need a formal education, but also apprenticeship training. Many start as copywriters for advertising agencies or as writers for educational and informational film companies. Cinematographers, camera operators, and sound engineers usually have either a college or technical school education, or they go through an apprenticeship program. Computer skills are required for many editing, special effects, and cinematography positions.

In addition to colleges and technical schools, many private institutes offer training programs on various aspects of

filmmaking, such as scriptwriting, editing, directing, and acting. For example, the American Film Institute offers training in directing, production, cinematography, screenwriting, and production design.

The educational background of managers and top executives varies widely, depending on their responsibilities. Most managers have a bachelor's degree in liberal arts or business administration. Their majors often are related to the departments they direct. For example, a degree in accounting or finance, or in business administration with an emphasis on accounting or finance, is suitable academic preparation for financial managers.

Employers prefer individuals with an undergraduate degree in marketing, advertising, or business for top-level positions in these departments. Experience in retail and print advertising is also helpful. A high school diploma and retail or telephone sales experience are beneficial for sales jobs.

Promotion opportunities for many jobs are extremely limited because of the narrow scope of duties and skills of the occupations. Thousands of jobs are also temporary, intermittent, part time, or on a contract basis, making advancement difficult. Individual initiative is very important for advancement in these fields.

Scriptwriters usually have had writing experience as freelance writers or editors and writers in other employment settings. As they build a reputation in their career, demand for their screenplays or teleplays increases, and their earnings grow. Some become directors or producers. Editors often begin as editing room assistants; cinematographers usually start as assistant camera operators; and sound recordists often start as boom operators and gradually progress to sound engineer. Computer courses in digital sound and electronic mixing are often important for upward mobility.

General managers may advance to top executive positions such as executive or administrative vice-president in their own firm, or to similar positions in a larger firm. Top-level managers may advance to chief operating officer and CEO. Financial, marketing, and other managers may be promoted to top management positions or may transfer to closely related positions in other industries. Some may start their own businesses.

Earnings

Earnings of workers in the motion picture production and distribution industry vary, depending on education and experience, type of work, union affiliation, and duration of employment. In 1998, average weekly earnings of nonsupervisory workers in motion picture production were $789, compared to $442 for workers in all industries.

Based on a union contract that extends through June 1999, motion picture and television actors and actresses, who are members of Screen Actors Guild, will earn a minimum daily rate of $576, or $2,000 for a 5-day week. They also receive additional compensation for reruns. Annual earnings from acting are low, however, because employment is very irregular. According to the Actors Equity Association, only about 15 percent of the stage actors they represent are employed during any given week. In an entire year, less than half of their membership will receive any income from stage acting. For members who are able to find employment, their average yearly earnings in 1998 were less than $15,000. Many actors and actresses supplement their incomes from acting with other jobs outside the industry. Some well-known actors get salaries well above the minimums, and of course, earnings of the few top stars are astronomical.

Salaries for directors vary widely. Producers seldom get a set salary; instead, they get a percentage of a show's earnings or ticket sales. Earnings in selected occupations in motion picture production and distribution in 1997 appear in table 2.

Table 2. Median hourly earnings of the largest occupations in motion picture production and services, 1997

Occupation	Motion picture production and services	All industries
General managers and top executives	$38.63	$26.05
Artists and related workers	16.89	14.89
Producers, directors, actors, and other entertainers	12.27	—
Industrial truck and tractor operators	9.03	10.99

Outlook

Americans spend billions of dollars every year to be entertained, much of it in this industry. The increasing availability of cable and satellite television has spurred demand for film and videotape production of domestic and foreign television, feature films, home video, and informational, educational, and industrial films. In response to this demand, wage and salary employment in motion picture production and distribution is projected to increase 17 percent over the 1998-2008 period, compared to 15 percent growth projected for all industries combined. In addition to new jobs resulting from growth, many more jobs will arise as workers leave this high-turnover industry.

This growing demand will provide increased employment opportunities for workers in nearly every major occupational group. Among the less glamorous, behind-the-scenes occupations, employment growth is expected for many technicians and helpers, such as gaffers and set construction workers. Job growth is also expected in film reproduction, distribution, and rental, as more large studios turn to this part of the business.

There will also be increased employment opportunities for the more glamorous, higher-paying jobs, such as actors, directors, and producers. As always, however, there will continue to be keen competition for the more visible jobs in the industry because of the number of jobseekers. Relatively few will find regular employment in these jobs.

Sources of Additional Information

For general information on actors, actresses, directors, and producers, contact:

- Screen Actors Guild, 5757 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90036-3600.
- American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, Suite 204, 4340 East-West Hwy., Bethesda, MD 20814.

Information on many motion picture production and distribution occupations, including the following, may be found in the 2000-01 *Occupational Outlook Handbook*:

- Actors, directors, and producers
- Artists and commercial artists
- Broadcast and sound technicians
- General managers and top executives
- Photographers and camera operators
- Writers and editors, including technical writers